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Citation

Riley, Howard. 1981. 'Review of *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music* by Derek Bailey'. *Contact*, 22. pp. 27-28. ISSN 0308-5066.

The book is divided into sections dealing with the use of improvisation in Indian music, flamenco, Baroque music,

church organ playing, jazz, rock, and contemporary Western composition, and finally with free improvisation itself. Along the way relevant topics are confronted – the relationship between composition and improvisation, the audience, improvisation in the classroom. What makes the book so valuable is that in each section practising musicians talk to Bailey about the nature of improvisation and their own idiomatic use of it (some of this material comes from a series of radio interviews). There are insights here that could only be imparted by practitioners for, despite the implications of the current populist vogue, certain types of musical information become apparent only through playing. A balance is achieved between specifically technical and more general discussion – not always an easy thing. Yes, it's a good read as well, although there are absolutely no traces of the fanzine syndrome.

I admit to certain misgivings when I first received the book. Improvisation, by its very nature, seems to me to be a self-sufficient activity which almost defies verbal explanation or justification. But, in the context of what is a predominantly literary culture, verbal discussion can hopefully lead on to the hearing and/or playing of music, and I see this as being one of the strongest merits of this work. Also, most of the inherent pitfalls of such a study are admitted and faced fairly in the text itself. Thus, there are no music examples for, as Bailey puts it, 'transcription, it seems to me, far from being an aid to understanding improvisation, deflects attention towards peripheral considerations' (p. 4).

Subjectivity and objectivity are well balanced. It would have been unrealistic to expect Bailey, a practising musician, to be purely objective in his approach. Naturally, most of the subjectivity surfaces in the free improvisation and general discussion sections. Given this, I would have welcomed even more subjective opinions by the author on the differences between idiomatic and non-idiomatic improvisation, and especially on how a non-idiomatic improviser can avoid becoming idiomatic – in other words, how he can create his own points of reference without working within a recognisable overall tradition.

To summarise: improvisation has been consistently misunderstood or ignored by the 'serious' sections of the musical world, and has never been given the documentation it deserves as one of the major catalytic forces in this century's music. Derek Bailey's book is, I hope, the first of

many projects to redress the balance, for there is no reason why it should not set a shining example for others to follow in the future. My main regret after reading it was that there wasn't more of it, for inevitably any single book has to be selective in its material; all the more reason, of course, for future work by others with different viewpoints. For now, though, I can thoroughly recommend all readers of this magazine to buy, read and absorb Bailey's book. At the very least you'll find it thought-provoking, and it could even be revelatory.

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